

Alexander Robert Chisholm House
No. 6 Montague Street
Charleston
Charleston County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-260

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ALEXANDER ROBERT CHISHOLM HOUSE

Address: No. 6 Montague Street, Charleston, Charleston 168-
County, South Carolina

Present Owner: Louis J. Lempsesis, 29 Broad Street, Charleston,
South Carolina.

Present Occupant
and Use: Vacant; unused

Statement of
Significance: An early 19th-century mansion with fine architec-
tural details

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Original owners: Thought to have been built for the Laurens family [Simons]. Alexander Robert Chisholm purchased lots from William Morris in 1816 (Register Mesne Conveyance Office, Book K-9, p. 172). Mary Chisholm sold to Thomas N. Gadsden in 1835 (RMCO L-10, 220). T. N. Gadsden sold to Thomas B. Clarkson in 1835 (RMCO L-10, 319), who sold to Margaret H. Laurens (RMCO T-10, 1). [Stoney].

B. Date of erection: c. 1810 [Simons]. Probably completed 1816-17 [Stoney].

C. Sources of information: Interview with Albert Simons, F.A.I.A., 10 North Atlantic Wharf, Charleston, S. C. on June 11, 1962, and information furnished by Mr. Samuel G. Stoney, 129-X Tradd Street, Charleston, S. C.

D. Important old maps: An engraved map of 1802, for J. J. Negrin's Directional Register & Almanac, indicates that this site was vacant then. A page dated May 1, 1851, in Robert C. Allen, Survey Charleston, 1851, Vol. 1 (a field notebook), indicates the block plan of this house as being somewhat deeper than its width, with a narrow wing extending to the rear a like depth, along the east side. No outbuildings are shown on this site. Both of these documents are in the collection of the South Carolina Historical Society, Fireproof Building, Charleston, South Carolina.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: An early 19th-century mansion with fine interiors in the Adam style, some later additions at the rear, and alterations to the stairway.

2. Condition of fabric: The original part of the building appears structurally sound, and until recent years the finish must have been in good condition. It has now been vacant for a year or more, exposed to the elements and to vandals. Many windows have been broken, some hardware has been removed, and neglect and weathering have brought about some deterioration, particularly to the additions at the rear. In spite of this a thorough cleaning, minor repairing, and careful refinishing could put the building in good condition. Every day contributes to the deterioration, however, as long as the building is vacant.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: The original part is about 48' wide and 51' deep; three stories; faces south.

2. Foundations: The foundations appear to be a continuation of the brick walls which constitute the ground story.

3. Wall construction:

s. Ground story: Brick of a large size (common in Charleston) laid in Flemish bond, now painted on the exterior, about 15" thick. Bearing partitions are also of brick.

b. First and second stories: Frame, covered with clapboards (possibly of cypress) exposed 7-3/4", painted. Corner boards.

4. Porchea: A three-story piazza extends across the south front. The ground story is of brick with five arched bays, closed at both ends, paved with stone.

The first story has five bays, wooden Roman Doric columns with a wide neck, very low wood arches with guilloche ornament, acanthus leaf over the columns, wood railing with turned balusters, and flooring of 5-1/2" longleaf yellow pine matched boards. There is a simple entablature. The ceiling is of long moulded wood panels, characteristic of Charleston.

The second story has slender Greek Doric columns of solid wood, with lintels. The entablature has modillions in the cornice. The wood railing has turned balusters. Floor is of matched longleaf yellow pine boards, 3-1/2" to 5" in width; ceiling of matched and beaded boards, some of them missing.

At the west end of the north side s piazzs has been filled in to constitute a room on the first story. This may also be the case for the room above it on the second story, but the evidence is not clear.

A rear porch at the side of an addition to the north is in very poor condition; its design has nothing in common with the main part of the house.

5. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys (see plan description below).

6. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: On the ground story, at the center of the south facade, a simple door in a masonry opening connects the piazza with an entrance hall.

On the first story, a central doorway opens from the piazza to the stair hall. In an elliptical arched opening is a door with side lights and fan light. A simple moulding consisting of two flutes extends around the door and side lights, with corner blocks having projecting rosettes. A narrow frieze and cornice with echinus moulding complete the transom bar. Side lights are double hung, with wood muntins, and wood paneling below the glazed portion. The door is an obvious replacement, being glazed with an oval light, of a type popular about 1900.

b. Windows and shutters: Ground-floor windows are set in masonry openings without trim; double-hung sash, six lights over six lights. Other windows have wooden architrave trim, double-hung sash which are probably not original, with two lights over two lights; many have been broken by vandals. Most windows retain louvred shutters with wrought-iron strap hinges, pintles and square bolts. The hold-backs have catches, like a latch.

In the second-story hall the upper part of a stair-landing window opening remains, with semicircular head; sash cord pulleys are still in place.

7. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: There is a hip roof over the original (south) part of the house, pitched 8-3/4" rise to 12" horizontally. It is now covered with sheet metal, standing seams.

b. Cornice: A wood cornice with modillions extends around the original part of the house; a simpler wood cornice continues around the remainder. Modern sheet-metal gutters are now in place.

c. Dormers: There is a small dormer at the east end and at the west end of the original part of the house, and a wider one, treated as a pediment, centered on the south side which lights the attic hall, with a semicircular window.

C. Technical Description of Interiors

1. Floor plans:

a. Ground floor: A piazza about 11' wide extends along the south front; behind this is a central hall with one room (about 18' x 24') on each side. There is a fireplace centered on the north end of each room. A bathroom has been built into the north end of the hall, and a room added north of the west room, at undetermined dates--apparently during the present century. There is an open space underneath the rear wing of the upper stories, interrupted irregularly by the brick piers which support them; it is partly paved with brick.

b. First floor: A piazza extends along the south front; behind this is a central hall with one room on each side, with a fireplace centered on the north wall of each room. To the north of this is an addition apparently constructed about the middle of the 19th century, consisting of one room on each side of a central hall; part, or perhaps all, of this was accomplished by filling in a piazza. At an undetermined date, perhaps later, a further addition about 20' wide was made at the northeast corner to provide a kitchen, storage space and rear porch. This addition is in rather poor condition, especially the rear porch and stairs. The ceiling height is approximately 11'-8". The second floor plan is nearly identical.

c. Attic: Over the original part of the house is a small finished attic, under the slope of the roof, with a central hall and one room on each side.

2. Stairways: Apparently there was a stairway, with two flights and a landing, in the central hall, extending from the ground floor to the third floor. At an undetermined date, perhaps circa 1900, this was removed, and replaced by an enclosed straight flight from the ground floor to the first floor. A wooden stair tower was added at the east end of the south piazza to provide access between the three floors.

A narrow stair with winders leads from the second floor to the attic, in a small compartment at the south end of the second floor hall.

A wooden exterior stairway, in poor condition, is located at the north end of the house; its design is of no interest.

3. Flooring: In the original part of the first and second floors, the flooring is of longleaf yellow pine, matched boards varying from 4" to 7" in width. Flooring in the added rooms varies, with generally narrower yellow pine boards, as small as 2-3/8" in the northwest room on the first floor.

Ground floor rooms are floored with wood; those in the attic are of longleaf yellow pine boards from 8-1/2" to 13-3/4" wide, 7/8" thick. Attic floor joists are 3" x 9-1/2", 22" on centers.

4. Room finish and trim; ground floor: Plaster walls and ceilings, simple trim.

5. Room finish and trim: first floor:

a. Southwest room: Everything in this room appears original except the mantel and French door to the left of the fireplace. It is the finest room in the house. Walls and ceiling are plaster; the walls have been papered but much of the paper has peeled off. There is a plaster cornice consisting of a small group of mouldings a few inches below the ceiling line and a band about 3" wide on the ceiling, about a foot from the wall line; this band is in relief, reeded, and has square panels containing fleurettes at regular intervals. There is a wood paneled wainscot, with gouge work decoration along the dado rail giving the effect of a swag motive.

The wood trim of the two doors on the east wall is similar to that of the four windows, except for the doors being lower. A pilaster at each jamb has two vertical panels, each containing a reeded colonnette. Entablatures break around the pilasters, the architrave mouldings forming the pilaster "capitals." The architrave is reeded; there are ornate dentils in the cornice and a double row of incised marks forming a decorative band along the fascia. Doors are 3'-3-1/2" x 7'-5" x 1-3/4", with six moulded panels. The base and plinth of the pilasters extend around the room as the base of the wainscot.

The window reveals extend to the floor, with paneling below the openings corresponding to that of the wainscot. There are paneled interior shutters.

The marble mantel, with a round arched opening and shelf, appears to be a mid-nineteenth century replacement. The doorway adjoining it at the left has wood architrave trim.

b. Southeast room. The entire room appears original except for a cast iron fire frame, which has a honeysuckle motif in the corner spandrels, and arched opening. Wainscoting and doors are similar to those in the southwest room. Walls and ceiling are of plaster, with a plaster cornice. Door and window openings have wood architrave trim, reeded, with mitred corners.

The mantel has reeded pilasters with inverted bell capitals, a small swag motive in relief along the architrave, and ornate dentils in the cornice--this is of wood. There is a marble facing around the fireplace opening, and a stone hearth.

c. Hall: The front part appears original; the rear part, including the stair enclosure, has been altered clumsily, particularly the patching of the plaster cornice. Wood architrave trim around door openings, plaster cornice, and ornamental plaster on the ceiling of the front portion, of Adam character.

d. Added rooms north of the original ones. These may have been constructed around the middle of the nineteenth century. Walls and ceiling are plastered on wood lath and papered, with wainscoting of vertical matched and beaded boards. Doors vary--some four-panel, some six-panel, some with glazing. The room on the east has a fireplace with simple mantel. The room on the west has no fireplace; its ceiling is of paneled wood which appears to have been the ceiling of an original piazza.

6. Room finish and trim; second floor.

a. Southwest room. This is largely similar to the corresponding room on the first floor, and appears original except for the mantel. The interior window shutters show painted imitation wood graining on the back, and in the recesses into which they fold. Closet doors are "grained" similarly on the back.

b. Southeast room. This is quite similar to the corresponding room on the first floor. A slight break in the wainscoting reveals that it is of white pine--this is quite possibly the material used for trim throughout the original part of the building.

c. Hall. This space is divided, the front portion forming a vestibule which appears original. At the north end is a round arched opening--the upper part of an original stair-landing window--with architrave trim in wood.

d. Northwest room. This has plastered walls and ceiling; the fireplace has a simple mantel with crossetted architrave, shelf, and plinth blocks. The hearth is of stone.

7. Room finish and trim; attic. These spaces are plastered on what appears to be split wood lath. The two doors are board and batten.

8. Hardware: Much of the door hardware has disappeared, apparently recently. Doors are hung typically on two cast-iron butts; most in the original part of the building had box locks. One remains in the southwest room on the first floor; it is cast iron, 4-1/4" x 7-3/4". Door knobs are mostly ceramic, probably replacements. Many sash have cast-iron locks on the meeting rail, which appear to be of a late nineteenth century type. Some nails visible in the attic are an early type of cut nail with machine-formed heads.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: This house faces south on a residential street, having a frontage of about 75 feet. The lot is very deep. The house is about 40 feet from the sidewalk.

2. Enclosures: Along the front is a wrought-iron fence on a stuccoed brick base, with a single ornamental gate on axis. There is no gate at the west end--merely an opening through which vehicles can enter. There is a brick wall to the rear of the house along the east property line, which has deteriorated considerably.

3. General: There is no observable trace of outbuildings or landscape treatment.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
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